

Washington, DC – Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) voted in favor of the fiscal year 2009 appropriations bill for military construction and Veterans affairs, which will provide more funding than the 2008 bill or the President's request. It focuses resources on improving the quality of life for military personnel and their families, and on increasing the amount of assistance that the VA can offer to the men and women who have defended our nation. The legislation, which passed the House by a 409-4 margin, allocates \$72.7 billion, \$8.8 billion more than fiscal year 2008 and \$3.4 billion more than the President's request. — "We have a moral obligation to ensure that the men and women who wear the cloth of this nation receive the best possible treatment for themselves and their families both during and after their service," said Congressman Sestak. "This legislation recognizes areas that require improvement and provides critical funds to meet these needs, including billions of dollars for military housing, and resources that allow the VA to offer more medical services to more Veterans, particularly in the area of mental health care."

The portion of the bill dedicated to military construction apportions \$24.8 billion to improve facilities and provide necessary funds to implement base closures and realignments. Of particular significance is the \$336 million not requested by the President that continues a quality of life initiative for troops and their families. Established by the 2008 supplemental bill, this program supports building new trainee and recruit housing facilities for the Army and Marine Corps, and upgrading medical treatment facilities. An additional \$3.2 billion is appropriated to further eliminate inadequate military housing.

Building on the largest ever increase in VA funding that the Congressman supported a year ago, this legislation provides \$47.7 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs, covering specific enhancements to medical treatment for Veterans as well as construction projects that will allow for more Veterans to receive services. The Veterans Health Administration estimates that they will treat more than 5.8 million patients in 2009, including more than 333,275 who have fought in Iraq or Afghanistan. The \$30.9 billion allocated for medical services (\$1 billion more than the President's request) will permit enrollment of Priority 8 Veterans, starting at ten percent of those in that category. An estimated one half of all uninsured Veterans are Priority 8, but these Veterans have not been enrolled since 2003 as part of an effort to cut costs.

The medical services funding also focuses on two areas of growing concern: mental health and homelessness. This bill appropriates \$3.8 billion for specialty mental health care and \$584 million for substance abuse programs. To address homelessness, this act builds on the Homes for Heroes Act, which the Congressman supported to establish a supportive housing program at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for low-income veterans. The appropriations bill provides \$130 million for the homeless grants and per diem program, rejecting the President's \$8 million cut, and includes \$32 million to hire additional personnel for

the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program.

“These are two issues that are not going away,” said Congressman Sestak. “Thousands of troops are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues, and more Veterans of the current wars are falling into homelessness faster than we have seen in any prior conflicts. It is imperative that we continue to devote as many resources as possible to combating these serious problems.”

The legislation also designates \$5 billion for medical facilities, \$368 million above the President’s request and \$769 million above 2008. It includes a \$300 million increase for on-going maintenance and renovations of existing facilities to address identified shortfalls and to ensure the Department’s facilities remain capable of delivering world class medicine. The Department currently estimates a maintenance backlog of more than \$5 billion. Furthermore, \$165 million is dedicated to Extended Care Facilities, paying for grants to States for construction and renovation of extended care facilities. The funding level will meet identified life/safety needs and still provide funding for construction of additional new facilities.

In addition to supporting increases in funding to aid military personnel and Veterans, Congressman Sestak has worked hard in his District to help them obtain the assistance they need. His office has closed hundreds of individual cases and, in May, he hosted his second annual Veterans Summit where he gave Veterans of his District open access to resources to address their individual needs and broader concerns about Veterans’ issues. Attendees had the opportunity to speak face-to-face with experts, including House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner, on subjects ranging from healthcare to education benefits to aid for Veteran-owned small businesses. In addition representatives from various Veterans organizations and other initiatives staffed 35 booths to provide one-on-one assistance.

Other funding provisions in the bill that passed today include:

For Military Construction:

- 2005 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) and Re-stationing: \$9.1 billion, \$1.8 billion above 2008 and the same as the President’s request, to implement base closures and realignments, and support the re-stationing of 70,000 troops and their families from overseas to

the United States. The bill also funds planning for the eventual relocation of 8,000 marines and 9,000 dependents from Okinawa to Guam.

- Growing the Force: \$5.6 billion in military construction and family housing, to support the Administration's program to increase the size of the Army by 65,000, the Marine Corps by 27,000, and the Guard and Reserve by 9,200 personnel.
- 1990 BRAC: \$473 million, \$178 million above 2008 and \$80 million above the President's request, to address an estimated \$3.5 billion backlog in needed environmental cleanup for bases that were closed during the four previous BRAC rounds as identified in most recent Defense Environmental Programs Annual Report.

For the Department of Veterans Affairs:

- Fee-Based Care: \$200 million, not requested by the President and not funded in 2008, for fee-based services to improve access to care where VHA services are not available.
- Beneficiary Travel: \$100 million above the President's request to increase the beneficiary travel reimbursement rate from 28.5 cents per mile to 41.5 cents per mile.
- New Generation Prosthetics: \$1.6 billion, \$250 million above 2008 and \$116 million above the President's request, to provide veterans with appropriate prosthetic support given recent advances in technology.
- Medical Support and Compliance: \$4.4 billion, \$144 million above the President's request and \$338 million above 2008, to ensure the efficient operation of the Department's health care system and to support plans to increase enrollment of Priority 8 veterans by 10 percent.
- Medical and Prosthetic Research: \$500 million, rejecting the President's \$38 million cut and \$20 million above 2008, for research to help improve the quality of life for injured and aging veterans. Restores the cuts to trauma and mental health research – important to veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Major and Minor Construction: \$1.9 billion, rejecting the President's \$788 million cut and \$215 million above 2008, to fulfill the Department's commitment to fund recommendations made by the Capitol Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES), which was established to look at facilities and determine their construction needs. The increase in minor construction will enable the Department to complete 145 projects in fiscal year 2009.
- General Operating Expenses: \$1.8 billion, \$102 million above the President's request and \$197 million above 2008, to enable the Department to hire roughly 2,100 additional claims processors to work down the backlog of benefits claims and to reduce the time to process new claims. The most recent VA quarterly status report estimates that nearly 396,000 claims are pending which is 20,000 more than their goal.
- Information Technology: \$2.5 billion, \$232 million above 2008 and \$50 million above the President's request, for an emergency fund to address critical unplanned needs at medical facilities.
- Inspector General: \$87.8 million, rejecting the President's \$4 million cut and \$7.3 million above 2008, to provide additional personnel for oversight activities, including inspections of community based outpatient clinics and VA Centers.

For related agencies:

- American Battle Monuments Commission: \$55.5 million, \$11 million above 2008 and \$8 million above the President's request. This funding provides for the care and operation of our military monuments and cemeteries around the world.
- United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims: \$73.98 million, \$51 million above 2008 and \$50 million above the President's request, for the acquisition of a new facility for the Court.
- Cemeterial Expenses: \$31.2 million, matching 2008 and the President's request, for Arlington cemetery.
- Armed Forces Retirement Home: \$63 million from the Trust Fund, the same as the President's request, for operation and maintenance of the Armed Forces Retirement Home, including \$8 million for capital expenditures at the DC campus.

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the Congress.